II. AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

The following listing of claims replaces all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

1. (Currently Amended) A method for regulating access by users to a scarce resource, the method comprising the steps of:

receiving a request for immediate access to the scarce resource;

determining, upon receipt of the request, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a fixed predetermined maximum number of users, the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource, that it is desired be simultaneously accessing the scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, automatically allocating to a server determined access slot, which specifies a time period during which the scarce resource may be accessed, said requester; and

providing said requester with a notification of their allocated access slot, access being available to said requester at any point in the time period during which said allocated slot is enabled.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of providing said requester with a notification of their allocated access slot comprises:

issuing said requester with a ticket comprising access slot information, at least a part of said access slot information being used by said requester to determine when said allocated slot is enabled.

3. (Original) The method of claim 2, wherein said access slot information comprises a start time for said access slot and an expiry time for said access slot.

4. (Original) The method of claim 1, comprising the step of:

downloading onto said requester's computer an executable program for preventing said requester from attempting to access said scarce resource until said requester's access slot has been enabled.

5. (Original) The method of claim 1, comprising the step of:

responsive to said requester re-requesting access to said scarce resource, determining whether said access slot is enabled; and

responsive to determining that said access slot is enabled, granting access.

6. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein a re-request presents a ticket issued to the requester upon the first request, said ticket denoting an access slot information, said method further comprising the step of:

using said presented ticket to determine whether access is available to said requester.

7. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein the step of granting access comprises:

diverting said requester to a first server hosting said scarce resource.

8. (Original) The method of claim 5, comprising the step of:

responsive to determining that access is not available, diverting said request to a second server, said second server providing the requester with entertainment whilst waiting for said access slot to be enabled.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1, comprising the step of:

providing said requester with entertainment whilst said requester is waiting for said access slot to be enabled.

10. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of determining whether said access level for said scarce resource is at a desired maximum consists of:

tracking the number of users currently accessing the scarce resource; and

comparing said number with a predetermined maximum value.

11. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, comprising the steps of:

receiving a late request for access to said scarce resource:

determining that ~~from~~ said requester had been previously allocated to a slot and had ~~having~~ missed the time period during which the allocated slot was enabled;

determining, upon receipt of the late request, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether said scarce resource is able to accommodate immediate access by said late requester; and

responsive to determining that it is possible to accommodate immediate access, granting immediate access to said requester.

12. (Original) The method of claim 1, comprising the steps of:

determining the average time spent accessing said scarce resource; and

determining the length of subsequent access slots based on said average time.

13. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said scarce resource comprises a chain of resources.

14. (Original) The method of claim 1, comprising the steps of:

determining that said requester's slot is at an end; and refusing access to the scarce resource by said requester.

15. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, comprising:

determining that said requester is currently accessing said scarce resource and that said requester's access slot is at an end;

determining that said requester has not finished accessing said scarce resource;

determining, in response to a determination the said requester has not finished accessing said scarce resource, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether said scarce resource is able to accommodate continued access by said requester; and

responsive to determining that said requester is able to accommodate continued access, granting continued access to said requester.

16. (Original) The method of claim 13, wherein said access slot only applies to one of the resources in the chain and any other resource in said chain is accessible whether or not said slot is enabled.

17. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, comprising the steps of:

receiving a request for access to said scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said requester previously had access to the scarce resource and opted to leave said scarce resource early, determining whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether said scarce resource can re-accommodate immediate access by said requester; and

responsive to determining that the scarce resource can re-accommodate immediate access, granting said requester with immediate access to said scarce resource.

18. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for regulating access by users to a scarce resource, the apparatus comprising ~~the steps of~~:

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a processor; and

a memory, the memory including:

means for receiving a request for immediate access to the scarce resource;

means for determining, upon receipt of the request, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a <u>fixed</u> predetermined maximum number of users, <u>the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource,</u> that it is desired be <u>simultaneously</u> accessing the scarce resource;

means, responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, for automatically allocating to a server determined access slot, which specifies a time period during which the scarce resource may be accessed, said requester; and

means for providing said requester with a notification of their allocated access slot, access being available to said requester at any point in the time period during which said allocated slot is enabled.

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19. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, wherein the means for providing said requester with a notification of their allocated access slot comprises:

means for issuing said requester with a ticket comprising access slot information, at least a part of said access slot information being used by said requester to determine when said allocated slot is enabled.

20. (Original) The apparatus of claim 19, wherein said access slot information comprises a start time for said access slot and an expiry time for said access slot.

21. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for downloading onto said requester's computer an executable program for preventing said requester from attempting to access said scarce resource until said requester's access slot has been enabled.

22. (Original) The apparatus of any of claims 18, comprising:

means, responsive to said requester re-requesting access to said scarce resource, for determining whether said access slot is enabled; and

means, responsive to determining that said access slot is enabled, for granting access.

23. (Original) The apparatus of claim 22, wherein a re-request presents a ticket issued to the requester upon the first request, said ticket denoting an access slot information, said apparatus further comprising:

means for using said presented ticket to determine whether access is available to said requester.

24. (Original) The apparatus of claim 22, wherein the means for granting access comprises:

means for diverting said requester to a first server hosting said scarce resource.

25. (Original) The apparatus of claim 22, comprising:

means, responsive to determining that access is not available, for diverting said request to a second server, said second server providing the requester with entertainment whilst waiting for said access slot to be enabled.

26. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for providing said requester with entertainment whilst said requester is waiting for said access slot to be enabled.

27. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 18, wherein the means for determining whether said access level for said scarce resource is at a desired maximum consists of:

means for tracking the number of users currently accessing the scarce resource; and

means for comparing said number with a predetermined maximum value.

28. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for receiving a late request for access to said scarce resource;

means for determining that from said requester had been previously allocated to a slot and had having missed the time period during which the allocated slot was enabled;

means for determining, upon receipt of the late request, whether the access level for said

scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

means for determining, responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a

desired maximum, whether said scarce resource is able to accommodate immediate access by

said late requester; and

means, responsive to determining that it is possible to accommodate immediate access,

for granting immediate access to said requester.

29. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for determining the average time spent accessing said scarce resource; and means

for determining the length of subsequent access slots based on said average time.

30. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, wherein said scarce resource comprises a chain of

resources.

31. (Original) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising the steps of:

means for determining that said requester's slot is at an end; and

means for refusing access to the scarce resource by said requester.

32. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for determining that said <u>requester is currently accessing said scarce resource and</u>

<u>that said</u> requester's access slot is at an end;

means for determining that said requester has not finished accessing said scarce resource;

means for determining, in response to a determination the said requester has not finished accessing said scarce resource, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

means for determining, responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, whether said scarce resource is able to accommodate continued access by said requester; and

means, responsive to determining that said requester is able to accommodate continued access, for granting continued access to said requester.

33. (Original) The apparatus of claim 30, wherein said access slot only applies to one of the resources in the chain and any other resource in said chain is accessible whether or not said slot is enabled.

34. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 18, comprising:

means for receiving a request for access to said scarce resource;

means, responsive to determining that said requester previously had access to the scarce resource and opted to leave said scarce resource early, for determining whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum;

means for determining, responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, whether said scarce resource can re-accommodate immediate access by said requester; and

means, responsive to determining that the scarce resource can re-accommodate immediate access, for granting said requester with immediate access to said scarce resource.

35. (Currently Amended) A ~~computer program product stored on a~~ computer readable medium having a computer program product stored thereon comprising program code adapted to perform the steps of:

receiving a request for immediate access to the scarce resource;

determining, upon receipt of the request, whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a fixed predetermined maximum number of users, the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource, that it is desired be simultaneously accessing the scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, automatically allocating said requester to a server determined access slot that specifies a time period during which the scarce resource may be accessed; and

providing said requester with a notification of their allocated access slot,

access being available to said requester at any point in the time period during which said allocated slot is enabled.

36. (Currently Amended) A method for determining whether a user can be granted access to a scarce resource after an access slot allocated to said user has expired, the method comprising the steps of:

tracking at least one interaction by said user associated with said scarce resource;

determining that ~~from~~ said requester had been previously been allocated to a slot and had ~~having~~ missed the time period during which the allocated slot was enabled;

responsive to an interaction, comprising a request, by said user for access to said scarce resource after the allocated access slot has expired and a determination that said requester had been previously allocated to the expired allocated access slot, using at least one tracked interaction to determine whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a fixed predetermined maximum number of users, the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource, that it is desired be simultaneously accessing the scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether the scarce resource can accommodate immediate access by the user to the scarce resource; and

responsive to determining that scarce resource can accommodate immediate access, granting said immediate access.

37. (Original) The method of claim 36, wherein the request for access is a request for continued access, said request being the only interaction tracked.

38. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 36, wherein said scarce resource comprises a chain of resources and wherein the step of using at least one tracked interaction to determine

whether the scarce resource can accommodate immediate access by the user to the scarce resource comprises:

determining the point reached by said user in the chain.

39. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for determining whether a user can be granted access to a scarce resource after an access slot allocated to said user has expired, the apparatus comprising:

a processor; and

a memory, the memory including:

means for tracking at least one interaction by said user associated with said scarce resource;

means, responsive to an interaction, comprising a request, by said user for access to said scarce resource after the allocated access slot has expired and a determination that said requester had been previously allocated to the expired allocated access slot, for using at least one tracked interaction to determine whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a fixed predetermined maximum number of users, the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource, that it is desired be simultaneously accessing the scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether the scarce resource can accommodate immediate access by the user to the scarce resource; and

means, responsive to determining that scarce resource can accommodate immediate access, for granting said immediate access.

40. (Currently Amended) A ~~computer program product stored on a~~ computer readable medium having a computer program product stored thereon for determining whether a user can be granted access to a scarce resource after an access slot allocated to said user has expired, said program comprising program code adapted to perform the steps of:

tracking at least one interaction by said user associated with said scarce resource;

responsive to an interaction, comprising a request, by said user for access to said scarce resource after the allocated access slot has expired and a determination that said requester had been previously allocated to the expired allocated access slot, using at least one tracked interaction to determine whether the access level for said scarce resource is currently at a desired maximum, the desired maximum indicating a fixed predetermined maximum number of users, the desired maximum indicating a plurality of users and being independent of a maximum physical capacity for the scarce resource, that it is desired be simultaneously accessing the scarce resource;

responsive to determining that said access level is currently at a desired maximum, determining whether the scarce resource can accommodate immediate access by the user to the scarce resource; and

responsive to determining that scarce resource can accommodate immediate access, granting said immediate access.